

## 2

## Isayo Samuddaka Sutta

The Discourse on the Seaside Rishis | S 11.10/1:227 f

Theme: Bad comes to the bad-doer

Translated by Piya Tan ©2012

1 Why the devas and the asuras fight

**1.1 ORIGIN OF THE ASURAS.** In Buddhist mythology, the younger devas under Shakra<sup>1</sup> are often seen battling with the older gods, the asuras, erstwhile inhabitants of Tāvatiṃsa.<sup>2</sup> Here, in **the Isayo Samuddaka Sutta** (S 11.10), Shakra is poised to battle with the asura Sambara.<sup>3</sup> Such battles are often recounted in stock passages in other early suttas.<sup>4</sup>

The roots of this animosity are given in a very interesting story. When Shakra and his 33 friends are reborn into the asura world (before it becomes Tāvatiṃsa), the asuras (the old gods) prepare “the fragrant drink” (*gandha,pāna*),<sup>5</sup> an intoxicating potion. Shakra, however, warns his companions not to drink it. The asuras who drink it become drunk and are thrown down Mt Sineru. Halfway down, they become sober and vow never to take strong drinks (*surā*) again; hence, their name, *asura*, “no more drink.”<sup>6</sup>

There is also a wordplay on *asura* (*a + sura*), where *sura* means “god, deva.”<sup>7</sup> Hence, the asuras, having fallen from the heavens, that is, being toppled from their position, are known as *a-sura*, that is, “former gods” (*pubba,deva*).<sup>8</sup> They are sometimes mentioned alongside nagas (serpent-beings) and gandharvas (celestial minstrels), inhabiting the oceans.<sup>9</sup> As the asuras are originally a part of the lower heavens, they are not listed as a separate realm or birth-destinations (*gati*). As such, in the early texts, we only have the five realms (*pañca,gati*), as given **the Pañca,gati Sutta** (A 9.68).<sup>10</sup> They are however incorporated into the six realms of later Buddhism.<sup>11</sup>

**1.2 WHY THE ASURA HATE THE SEASIDE RISHIS.** Just as Greek mythology speak of the Olympian gods and the Titans of Tartarus (a nether realm much deeper than Hades) as being ancient enemies, the Tāvatiṃsa devas and the asuras are traditional enemies often at war with each other. Often such a battle is the efforts of devas to prevent the asuras from destroying the wish-fulfilling tree [1.3].

<sup>1</sup> On Shakra (P *Sakka*; Skt *Śakra*), see **Devatānussati** = SD 15.13(2).

<sup>2</sup> There is, in Greek mythology, a similar struggle between the old gods, the Titans led by Cronus, who were toppled by the new Olympian gods under Zeus: see eg *The Routledge Handbook of Greek Mythology* (ed R Hard), 2004: 65-97 (ch 3). The word *asura* is sometimes tr as “titan.”

<sup>3</sup> On the problem of Sambara’s identity, see S:B 495 n631. See also (2) below.

<sup>4</sup> Eg D 2:285; M 1:253; S 1:216 ff, 222, 4:201 ff, 5:447; A 4:432. The Dhammapada Comy relates Shakra’s romantic marriage to **Sujā**, daughter of **Vepacitti**, one of the asura chiefs, who in fact becomes Shakra’s father-in-law (DhA 1278 f; cf J 1:205 f). Buddhaghosa explains that in those days, father-in-law (*sasura*) and son-in-law (*jā-māta*) sometimes battle with one another (SA 1:345)!

<sup>5</sup> Be *gandha,pāna*; Ce Ee *gaṇḍa,pāna*.

<sup>6</sup> SA 1:338. At DhA 1:272, the drink is called “the divine drink” (*dibba,pāna*). SED defs *gandha,pāna* as “a fragrant beverage.” The asuras are often compared with the Titans (12 brother and sisters according to Hesiod’s *Theogony*), who in Greek mythology were the children of Heaven and Earth. When the Titans rebelled against the chief god, Zeus, they were defeated and imprisoned in the underworld. The Titans may have been gods of an earlier cult ousted by the Olympian pantheon under Zeus, just as the devas under Shakra overthrew the asuras and inaugurated Tāvatiṃsa.

<sup>7</sup> Sn 681 :: SnA 484; UA 299,18.

<sup>8</sup> J 5:18,10\*; see also S 1:216 ff; J 1:202-204; DhA 1:272-280; SnA 484 f. For etym, see SA 1:338,21-22; SnA 485,5-9. As opposed to other classes of beings: D 2:269,17 = 2:276,4, qu MA 1:181,30. Two classes of asuras, Kvu 360-364. See also Sn 310; Tha 1128, cf It 92,18\*-93,1\* (ItA 2:118,17) ≠ J 5:186,21\*-24\*; Pv 785; Vism 501,21\* = VbhA 97,31\*; Vbh 412,29-416,39; Miln 117,28. For more refs, see CPD, sv.

<sup>9</sup> *Asurā nāgā gandhabbā* (scil *mahā,samudde*), V 2:238,16;A 4:207,1 = U 54,16.

<sup>10</sup> A 9.68/4:459 = SD 2.20.

<sup>11</sup> See **Pañca,gati S** (A 9.68) @ (2); **The body in Buddhism** = SD 29.6a (4.1.2+4); **Myth in Buddhism** = SD 36.1 (1.3.3). For further details, see Ency Bsm, sv asura.

The Sarniyutta Commentary explains that the devas (here meaning the Tāvātimsa gods) and the asuras are constantly at war. Here the battles occur on the ocean shore, beside the submarine dwelling of the asuras. Most of the time, the asuras are defeated, but occasionally the devas, under Shakra, are routed, when they will seek refuge amongst the seaside rishis, and consult them against being defeated by the asuras, who are also endowed with some kind of magical powers.

As such, the asuras, angered by the rishis' alliance with the devas, would destroy their dwellings, along with their water, water-pots, walkways (*caṅkamaṇa*), and pavilions. This destruction occurs with such frequency so as to upset the rishis, as it disrupts their lives. For this reason, they beseeched the asura chief to give them a guarantee of non-violation (SA 1:347), as related in this Sutta.

As both these beings are of the gods, they are “immortal” as long as their karma lasts. In that sense, they do not really die even when hurt in battle. Clearly, such accounts are to be taken as mythical, in the sense of stories with psychological motifs and morals. In the spirit of such teachings as given in **the Neyy’attha Nīt’attha Sutta** (A 2.3.5+6), the import of such stories need to be teased out and explained in terms of the Dharma and mental cultivation.<sup>12</sup>

**1.3 ASURA AS A PSYCHOLOGICAL STATE.** Psychologically, the asura is an embodiment of a violent narcissistic demon. The actions of an asura personality is almost always centred around himself: “If I do this, what do I get? How much are you worth to me?” and so on. An asura, in other words, often *measures* others. He injudiciously enjoys being *better* than others, uses those he perceives as being his *equals* for his selfish ends, and exploits or rejects those deemed as *inferior*. An asura enjoys violence, and has no qualms about using violence to get he wants, even if this entails the destruction of others and the environment.<sup>13</sup>

In later Buddhist mythology, the asuras are not only depicted as battling with the gods, or even amongst themselves, but also as trying to cut down the wish-fulfilling tree (*kalpa, vrkṣa* or *pārijāta*, the coral tree), that is rooted in the asura realm but flowers and fruits in the heavens. Just to taste some of its fruits, the asuras are willing to cut down the whole tree, destroying it. A related fable story is that of the goose that lays the golden eggs.<sup>14</sup>

The asura mentality is a *power*-oriented one, and can pervade a person as well as system (such as a political system or a religion). A religion that tolerates violence or promotes the forceful or unsolicited preaching and conversion is dominated by such a subhuman condition. The asura mind can sometimes taint even a “normal” mind; as such, we need to mindfully quell such a tendency, and uplift ourselves from such a subhuman state with charity, lovingkindness and wisdom.<sup>15</sup>

## 2 The rishis’ curse

At the heart of the Isayo Samuddaka Sutta is the rishis’ curse upon the Sambara, the chief of violent asuras, who keep destroying the rishis’ dwelling on the ocean shore. When Sambara not only refuses to grant safety to the rishis, but on the contrary, threatens more destruction, the desperate rishis are forced to place a curse on him. The rishis’ curse is actually a dark form of the “act of truth” (*sacca, kiriyā*), which goes thus:

Asking for safety, you give us but fear.  
we received this from you: may fear without end be yours!

Whatever seed that is sown, that is the fruit reaped therefrom;  
Good (comes) to the good-doer; bad to the bad-doer!

<sup>12</sup> A 2.3.5+6/1:60 = SD 2.6b.

<sup>13</sup> See **Notion of diṭṭhi** = SD 40a.1 (11.2.2).

<sup>14</sup> This is a well known Aesop’s fable of the goose that lays golden eggs. (See also [Avianus 33](#)). In **Suvanna, haṁsa J** (J 136/1:474-477), a bird with golden feathers is plucked bare by its owner; but when the feathers have re-grown, the bird flies away never to return. See <http://www.mythfolklore.net/aesopica/oxford/434.htm>. The moral of this fable is that greed seriously limits one’s wealth.

<sup>15</sup> See **Myth in Buddhism** = SD 36.1 (4.3.1+2).

By you, dear, the seed is sown, so the fruit you will taste. (S 902 f/11.10/1:227)<sup>16</sup>

It is said that as soon as Sambara falls asleep, he wake up howling as if struck from all sides by a hundred spears. The other asuras rush to comfort him until the break of dawn. Henceforth, his sickened mind trembles; hence, his other name, Vepa,citti (*cittam vepati*) (SA 1:347).<sup>17</sup>

It is interesting that no *natural* karma is working here at all! It is the rishis' *curse* that is shown to be working on Sambara as a sort of *lex talionis*, “an eye for an eye” justice. Sambara hurts the rishis, the rishis curse Sambara, tit for tat. This is clearly not the Buddhist vision of karma.

This verse or its popular version—“as we sow, so we shall reap”—has often been misquoted as a Buddhist article of faith. The interesting point here is that this stanza (*gāthā*), included in **the Sa,gāthā Vagga** (the first chapter) of the Saṃyutta Nikāya, actually belongs to the free floating ancient gnomic poetry of India which the Buddhists have preserved.<sup>18</sup> In other words, this is technically not “Buddha Word” (*Buddha,vacana*) but a popular saying. Only what is truly “well-said” (*subhāsita*)—that which lessens or removes greed, hate and delusion—is regarded as Buddha Word.

— — —

## The Discourse on the Seaside Rishis

S 11.10/1:227 f

1 At Sāvattihī.

### Impending battle between the devas and the asuras

2 “Once upon a time, bhikshus, a number of rishis [seers], morally virtuous, good by nature, dwelled in leaf-huts on the sea-shore.<sup>19</sup>

3 Now at that time, the devas and the asuras were prepared [arrayed] for battle.<sup>20</sup>

4 Then, bhikshus, it occurred to those rishis who were morally virtuous, good by nature, ‘Righteous are the devas; unrighteous are the asuras.’<sup>21</sup> There may be danger for us from the asuras. What now if we approach the asura chief, Sambara, and beseech him to promise us safety.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>16</sup> An almost identical saying, “By good works a man becomes good (*puṇya*), by evil works evil (*pāpa*),” attr to the Vedic sage Yajñavalkya and secretly transmitted to another sage, Jāratkāra (Bṛhad Āraṇyaka Upaniṣad 3.2). See A L Basham, *The Origins and Development of Classical Hinduism*, 1989:43 f.

<sup>17</sup> Vepa,citti appears in **Sambari Māyā S** (S 11.23) where is said to be ill due to the rishis' curse (S 11.23/1:238; SA 1:354).

<sup>18</sup> Winternitz 1933 2:57 f. Another example of the ancient Indian gnostic tradition is **Ālavaka S** (Sn 1.10), which is a riddle in the ballad (*ākhyāna*) form, given by the yaksha Ālavaka to the Buddha who answers them, Sn 181-192. “Too many cooks spoil the broth” and “Good wine needs no bush” are English gnomes.

<sup>19</sup> *Bhūta,pubbaṃ, bhikkhave, sambahulā isayo sīlavanto kalyāṇa,dhammā samudda,tīre paṇṇa,kuṭṭisu sammanti*. Here *sammanti*, 3 pl pres of *sammati*, “he rests, dwells, D 1:92; S 1:226; J 5:396; DA 1:262 (= *vasati*, “he dwells”); pp *santa*. Comy transport this scenario to a out-of-this-world spot: “they live in leaf-huts on a sand-bank that is the hue of a golden sheet in a great galactic ocean” (*cakkavāḷa,mahā.samudda,piṭṭhiyaṃ rajata,paṭṭa,vanṇe vāluka,pulīne vuttap-p.pakārāsu paṇṇa,sālāsu vasanti*, SA 1:346).

<sup>20</sup> *Tena kho pana samayena devāsura,saṅgāmo samupavyūḷho ahoṣi*.

<sup>21</sup> *Dhammikā kho devā, adhammikā asurā*. Here *dhammika* has a broad general sense of “good, just, kind, etc.”

<sup>22</sup> *Yan nūna mayāṃ sambaram asur'indam upasaṅkamitvā abhaya,dakkhinaṃ yāceyyāmāti*. **Abhaya,dakkhina**, “a gift of fearlessness, a provision for safety” (S 1:227,12+21\*; J 4:262,19\*, 427,14, 5:364,17\*).

### The rishis beseech Sambara

5 Then, bhikshus, the rishis, morally virtuous, good by nature, just as a strong man would stretch his bent arm or would bend his stretched arm, disappeared from their leaf-huts on the sea-shore and appeared before the asura chief, Sambara.

6 Then, bhikshus, the rishis, morally virtuous, good by nature, addressed the asura chief Sambara in verse, thus:

7	<i>Isayo sambaram pattā yācanti abhaya, dakkhiṇam kāmaṃ, karo hi te dātum bhayassa abhayassa vā'ti</i>	The rishis have come before Sambara beseeching for the gift of safety, for you could give this if you wish to, be it danger or safety.	900
---	--	---	-----

[Sambara:]

8	<i>Isīnam abhayam n'atthi duṭṭhānam sakka, sevinam abhayam yācamānānam bhayam eva dadāmi vo'ti</i>	There is no safety for you rishis, hateful Shakra devotees, asking for safety, I'll give you only danger!	901
---	--	--	-----

[The rishis:]

9.1	<i>Abhayam yācamānānam bhayam eva dadāsi no paṭiggaṇhāma te etaṃ akkhayam hotu te bhayam</i>	Asking for safety, you give us but danger: we receive this from you— may danger without end be yours!	902
-----	--	--	-----

9.2	<i>Yādisam vapate bījam tādisam harate phalaṃ kalyāṇa, kārī kalyāṇam pāpa, kārī ca pāpakam pavuttam tāta te bījam phalaṃ paccanubhossasīti.</i>	Whatever seed that is sown, that is the fruit reaped therefrom; good (comes) to the good-doer, and bad to the bad-doer! By you, dear, the seed is sown, so the fruit you will taste!	903
-----	---	---	-----

### Sambara is terrified

10 Then, bhikshus, the rishis, morally virtuous, good by nature, having cursed the asura chief, Sambara, just as a strong man would stretch his bent arm or would bend his stretched arm, disappeared before the asura chief Sambara, and appeared in their leaf-huts.

11 Then, bhikshus, the asura chief Sambara, after being cursed by the rishis, morally virtuous, good by nature, was thrice terrified in the night.<sup>23</sup>

— evaṃ —

120410; 120511; 120520; 120525; 120605a

<sup>23</sup> *Atha kho, bhikkhave, sambaro asur'indo tehi isīhi sīlavantehi kalyāṇa, dhammehi abhisapito rattiyā sudam tik-khattum ubbijjīti.*